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Seeing Like the Buddha: Enlightenment through Film

Abstract

This is a book review of Francisca Cho's *Seeing Like the Buddha: Enlightenment through Film*.

Author Notes

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Cho, Francisca. *Seeing Like the Buddha: Enlightenment through Film*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017.

Francisca Cho's *Seeing Like the Buddha: Enlightenment through Film* is, to date, the most important contribution to the academic exploration of the convergence of Buddhist and cinematic practices. Correcting for some of the fragmentation within the young subdiscipline, Cho focuses on Buddhist conduct as a means of reexamining those aesthetic tendencies that serve as the proper conditions for the "Buddhism" of film. One result of her methodology, and the close readings engendered by it, is a fresh conception of cinema's metaphysical and soteriological capacities which is at once welcomingly nuanced and unusually inclusive.

In an earlier review for the *Journal of Religion and Film*, Ronald S. Green compliments Sharon A. Suh's *Silver Screen Buddha: Buddhism in Asian and Western Film* for "exposing how the reduction of the subject matter in the films she treats does a disservice to Buddhism."¹ At the same time, Green expresses a concern that Suh ironically limits the possible scope of Buddhist-cinematic inquiry by minimizing the aesthetics of religious experience in favor of a critical examination of the representational politics of 'Buddhist' films. Suh's analyses confront "progressive *and* harmful images of gender, sex, and race to provide a more balanced view of the religion beyond the ubiquitous meditating monk."² Her study is vital, and her conclusions are valuable. Nevertheless, I argue that her hyper-focused reach exceeds the grasp proper to the embryonic stages of the subdiscipline.

Seeing Like the Buddha, though itself cast in mostly affirmative terms, serves as a hermeneutical rejoinder to Suh's emphasis on the overdetermination of social structures. Cho's work operates from within an East Asian intellectual tradition that withholds determinate judgments about the essential natures and positions of things, in order to be more fully *responsive*

to the conditions that allow for connection, engagement, and change as such. Her writing does not attempt to avoid sociopolitical concerns, but neither does it aim for an Archimedean point from which one might assign objective values to different elements of Buddhism or Buddhist cinemas. Instead, the text investigates human desires and interactions through the interdependent contingencies of history, culture, spirituality, and mindfulness.

The first chapter, “Seeing Like the Buddha,” serves less as a general introduction to the topic’s brief history than as a striking disciplinary manifesto. Cho bypasses hackneyed calls to simply “put into conversation” aesthetic forms and religious traditions. She is interested instead in those demands for, or condemnations of, iconic artefacts which are themselves immanent to distinct religious doctrines. This path allows her the room both to examine the complex differences of devotional premises and to proffer historical responses to religious-aesthetic practices both filmic and non-filmic. For instance, she relates the central position of revelation in Christian theology to the incessant demand for the reproduction of Christ’s image. Because Christ is believed to be God rendered in flesh and blood—both wholly divine and wholly human—the faithful have often felt it imperative that artists render Christ’s form in such a way that followers might pay homage to it. Such a need for obligatory representation, combined with an inadequate accounting of personal expression, has formed the basis of controversies surrounding works as varied as Renée Cox’s *Yo Mama’s Last Supper* (1996) and the Mel Gibson-directed *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).

Certain periods and schools within Mahāyāna Buddhism have manifested an inverse aesthetic relationship to what we find in many theistic religions, and with her explication of this fact, Cho presents the guiding structure of her text. Her primary claim, beginning with the very first sentence, is striking: “the objective of this book is to demonstrate that films can take on the

role that has been played by traditional Buddhist icons and images” (1). A core tenet of Buddhism is that of Buddha-nature, the innate capacity for enlightened living found in *all* sentient beings. This principle disregards the necessity (though not always the fact or value) of considering the historical Buddha, Siddhārtha Guatama, as a *uniquely* divine figure. Buddhist soteriology demands the cultivation of understanding and mindfulness not through adherence to dogmatic abstractions but by way of deep, personal, present self-awareness. Of course, this particular philosophical bent has guided in large part the trajectory of Buddhist aesthetics, and that trajectory sits at the center of Cho’s readings.

In what sense can films be of a piece with Buddhist iconography? The most general answer, deprived of any medium-specific conditions, is that such works must demonstrate the capacity to foster those manners of tangible and psychological engagement most receptive to a Buddhist livelihood. Such receptivity requires—and here we encounter an orthodoxy quite specific to the historical trajectory of thought in East Asia—that the devout inhabit *existentially* the same sacred domain as religious depiction, thereby blurring accepted (Western) boundaries between iconography and iconoclasm. As Cho puts it, “the emphasis shifts from *what* is seen to *how* one sees, which in turn renders art and aesthetic experiences into equivalents of the Buddha himself” (1). (Given the primacy of the *how*, the Western intellectual analogue would be found most readily within the borders of post-Kantian thought, perhaps phenomenology above all else, but even these forms lack the necessary soteriological upshot, which Cho establishes through the vigor of aesthetic expression.) As a result, the cinema seems to fulfill Buddhist spirituality’s sufficient conditions, and *Seeing Like the Buddha* tracks their realization through a succession of formal and thematic analyses.

For Cho, the conclusion is clear; the productive erasure of the historical Buddha and concomitant icons, which occurs through the religion's existential practice, provides film-Buddhist scholarship with the proper justification for Buddhist readings of films which might otherwise appear wholly secular or even abstract in nature. However, traditional images of the historical Buddha and numerous bodhisattvas remain ubiquitous, and there must be some way to bridge conventional iconography with its inevitable obfuscation. Appropriately, she uses a multi-faceted aesthetic icon (now within the domain of architecture) to formalize this connection:

. . . I construct three progressive ways of seeing the Buddha loosely based on an artistic precedent from the ancient Buddhist world—the temple known as Borobudur on the island of Java in Indonesia . . . The bottom levels consist of four nested galleries that progressively ascend toward the center . . . All four galleries feature highly elaborate relief carvings . . . After the fourth gallery, the pilgrim emerges onto three nested and circular open-air terraces. There are no view-obstructing walls here but an open space that offers panoramic vistas of the countryside . . . Seventy-two small stūpas sit atop the three terraces, each with a sitting Buddha that can be seen through the latticed openings of the stūpa covers. At the very top of the temple sits the main stupa, made of solid and visually impenetrable stone. (19-21)

In a highly creative move, Cho establishes two interlocking threads. The first connects ancient aesthetic structures with the foremost expressive and intellectual tool of our age – the moving image. The second narrativizes the progression from a traditional form of religious reverence, guided by distinguished images of historical figures and first principles, to a direct experience of the limits of any formal institution, accompanied by a newfound insight into the non-duality of form and emptiness. While both threads deserve attention and explication, the latter serves as the structure guiding each close reading throughout *Seeing Like the Buddha*.

The formal analyses begin with Kim Kiduk's *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter . . . and Spring* (2004). Just as the first levels of Borobudur are replete with the standard visual fare of Buddhist orthodoxy, Kim's film thematizes textbook Buddhist thought. Cho stresses *Spring's* 'karmic

narrative’ and examines the several ways that the director expresses through film form a Buddhist conception of causes and effects. This cause-and-effect relation is not approached in the manner of a singular, subjectivized classical narrative. What gets aestheticized is instead karma on a cosmic scale—the natural drives of cause and effect which both *subsume* and *inhabit* all lived human durations (reflected, respectively, in the titular seasonal circuit and in the lack of proper character names). What is at stake in Kim’s film is whether or not the pupil at the center of its karmic narrative can allow himself to be guided by the natural motion of things instead of the all-too-human complex of fears and desires.

Here, sight is explicated for the first time in relation to cinematic practice; it is the text’s central motif, one that transforms in accordance with the levels of Borobudur. The shot/reverse shot pattern, perhaps the most fundamental filmmaking tool, foregrounds the question of the clarity of perception. The monk’s apprentice repeatedly meets the gazes of his master and of the Buddha himself (as a statue) while never matching the fullness (and emptiness) of their *sight*. He is bound to the cycles of *samsara* without the knowledge that suffering and *nirvana* are one. *Spring* focuses mostly on this negative lesson, as Cho explains in far greater detail with various social, historical, and philosophical nuances. As a result, we must turn to other cinematic forms if we hope to find aesthetic renderings of more affirmative paths.

The third and fifth chapters of *Seeing Like the Buddha* are Cho’s weakest, and their limitations should be sketched before turning to the author’s other, better readings. With her treatment of Nonzee Nimibutr’s *Nang Nak* (1999), Cho attempts to expand the previous chapter’s discussion of karmic narratives with the inclusion of supernatural elements common to Buddhist storytelling *and* a critique of Buddhist gender politics. In the first instance, she overcomplicates the cogent analysis provided in the previous chapter. In the second instance, she dives into waters

better waded by Suh's work. Despite a sturdier structure, the fifth chapter—a treatment of Hirokazu Kore'eda's *Maborosi* (1995)—strays too far from the progression outlined by the central metaphor of Borobudur. Nevertheless, it contains a welcome comparative section detailing the continuities between Daoism and certain East Asian schools of Buddhism.

Such weaknesses are minor when placed alongside the developments of chapters four and six. At this point, the pilgrimage at Borobudur is reaching its final stages where the landscape has opened up and institutional icons are disappearing. Chapter four examines more fully the interpenetration of fullness and emptiness with the help of Akira Kurosawa's beloved *Rashomon* (1950). Kurosawa's fluid transitions between human affairs and their natural environment begin the process of decentering human identity and contextualizing the meanings of all forms. Moreover, the ephemeral depiction of moral truth for which the film is so famous provides a ground for reorienting cinematic practice around the wholesomeness of a question untainted by the limitations of an answer.

In chapter six, Cho delivers on her implicit promise to affirm the presence of Buddhist values within films lacking any explicitly Buddhist content. She turns to the arthouse and the works of American virtuoso Terrence Malick. As Cho remarks, Malick considered himself to be a poor philosophy instructor during his time in the academy, but visual art enabled his self-expression in a way that traditional scholarly venues never did. To one degree or another, all the aforementioned threads converge in Malick's cinema. In the simplest sense, his films highlight their own margins. They require that viewers engage with and mold the indeterminacies inhabiting his indirect approach, and this results in a peculiar form of experiential spectatorship that is highly intimate yet ultimately *impersonal*. The formal and thematic flows that engender this mode of viewing are simultaneously opposed to the didacticism of narrative orthodoxy and well-suited to the dissolving

of longstanding dualisms (subject/object, nature/nurture, cause/effect, et cetera). For Cho, Malick's filmography, while lacking a single overt reference to Buddhism or East Asian thought, nevertheless perfects the aesthetic rendering of "darkness and light" as "features of the same face" (123).

While Cho's individual analyses are potent and persuasive, I am less interested in their details than in the polyvalence of the framework supporting them. *Seeing Like the Buddha* is not merely a conduit for religious studies and film aesthetics, though it does serve as an exemplary model for future scholars working in that intersection. Cho's work is a productively malleable inquiry which, if it receives the attention it deserves, could become the urtext for comparative and non-Western film-philosophy. It is a welcome addition to the classroom and to a burgeoning subdiscipline in cinema and media studies.

¹ Green, Ronald S. (2015) "Silver Screen Buddha: Buddhism in Asian and Western Film," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 2, Article 4, pg. 2. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol19/iss2/4>

² Suh, Sharon A. (2015) *Silver Screen Buddha: Buddhism in Asian and Western Film*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic. Pg. 3.